

The last year has given **Thebe Ikalafeng**, Founder of Brand Africa and Brand Leadership Group, the time to consolidate an initiative that has been his ambition for over a decade, the launch of his Africa Brand Leadership Academy (ABLA). We caught up with Ikalafeng to hear what we can expect from the academy and the unique programme he has put together

# THE AFRICA BRAND LEADERSHIP ACADEMY LAUNCHES

**W**ith Covid disrupting our lives, many have had to pivot and/or embark on new careers or passions. Thebe Ikalafeng, Founder and Chairman of Brand Leadership, who has spent the best part of the last three years criss-crossing every country on the continent, has used the downtime to launch an education initiative focused on building great African brands. For the past eight years, *African Business* has partnered with Brand Leadership, Geopoll and Kantar to research and rank Africa's Most Admired Brands. Year after year, since the inception of the Brand Africa 100: Africa's Best Brands survey in 2010, no more than 20% of the brands admired by Africans have been African brands. Seeing that the situation was not improving spurred Ikalafeng to do something about it, and the result has been the launch of the Africa Brand Leadership Academy (ABLA). In the following interview he tells us about the thinking behind the Academy and what makes it unique.

## **Why the academy, why the need?**

Let me start at the beginning. We know we have a challenge in the continent and we have quantified it: In the last 10 years of our Brand Africa 100: Africa's Best Brands survey and rankings, on average only 20% of the brands that Africans admire are from Africa.

We know we've got the talent because there are several world-class brands made in Africa. With a population of 1.3bn we also know we've got the customer base and the corresponding consumer spend, so what we need to do now is to close the gap between African brands and non-African brands and inspire Africans to prefer and support competitive African brands.

What we need to do is to raise the

competitive ante and distinction of African brands because what we have seen is that in general African brands want to emulate non-African brands rather than go beyond that and compete with them on their differentiation and intimate knowledge of the African consumer.

## **Does that mean African brands are replicating what others are doing?**

Because of the long-term dominance and investment of non-African global brands in Africa, African brands that emerge tend to want to replicate these brands rather than differentiate themselves. The French brands differentiate

themselves on style, romance and sophistication. The British are about tradition and Americans are about pioneering entrepreneurship and global lifestyle. The Germans and Japanese distinguish themselves on their engineering ingenuity and craftsmanship. We need to compete on what makes Africa and Africans distinctive.

## **So how are we different?**

It starts with understanding, accepting and celebrating the essence of the continent and its people. We need to look at how our culture influences our creativity in order to distinguish ourselves. Culture is not about just being Zulu, Igbo or Kikuyu, but rather how we live, how we work and how we do things and how can we infuse these into our brands. Our enterprising and collaborative culture. Our cultural distinction.

Thus our programmes feature a foundational module on culture and creativity and we have on-boarded some of the most lauded African academics and thought leaders in African languages, archaeology and culture. Our brands must be deep rooted in the continent for them to win the hearts and minds of African consumers and distinguish us globally. There are a few brands which have tried to do that successfully but many have not yet achieved scale.

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## **Talk us through the curriculum**

Our primary focus is on five target groups: executives who are leading and managing African and non-African brands in Africa and want to adapt and respond to the challenges of the rapidly changing and diverse African environ-



ment; the next generation of leaders who want to accelerate their careers with practical skills; entrepreneurs who want to leverage the power of branding to build and grow their businesses; organisations who want customised Africa-focused brand learning solutions; and individuals who want to sharpen their skill, for whom we have short-learning programmes providing brand-focused insights on personal branding, brand governance, brand-led board leadership and responsible branding. The content straddles philosophy, history, strategy, systems thinking, financial management, human resources. Everything a business needs to thrive.

The curriculum reflects that branding goes beyond logos and campaigns, and is an integral strategy for building a sustainable business. It's a holistic approach delivering a service and delivering a promise from conception to delivery.

#### **How does the leadership and faculty reflect ABLA as pan-African institution?**

Our programmes will be delivered by a global African network of respected specialist and experienced practitioners, thought leaders and academics who collectively bring a rich blend of proven and lived insights on the continent and experience gained at the coalface of building brands in Africa.

ABLA will similarly be led by respected global Africans. Renowned Ethiopian thought leader and businesswoman, Dr Eleni Zaude Gabre-Madhin who founded the highly acclaimed Ethiopia Commodity Exchange is our founding Chancellor/President; retired Namibian Professor Tjama Tjivikua, the founding Vice-Chancellor of the Namibia University of Science and Technology is our founding Council Chairman; and I will be the founding Principal. This team is led by a Council of diverse and respected Africans who will be responsible for the good order and overall governance of ABLA.

#### **How will you be delivering this tuition?**

The pandemic has inspired and transformed the world of work and learning and pivoted it towards a distance learning and virtual delivery future. Thus ABLA programmes will be delivered in an interactive and engaging hybrid format. Initially it will be all virtual but ultimately it will be a hybrid format blending the virtual and in-person delivered at key economic capitals of the continent and virtually everywhere.

#### **What's so special about the entrepreneur programme?**

The one thing that distinguishes Africa is our entrepreneurial energy and

culture. But the challenge that most entrepreneurs are faced with, other than funding and scaling, is how to transform their commodities into world-class competitive brands; how to differentiate and leverage their personal, product and business brands, and finally how to protect and take their ideas to the marketplace profitably.

Our focus will be helping them on how to navigate these key challenges. We will not be teaching them entre-

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**Initially, all courses will be delivered online. At a later stage, additional courses will be delivered in person in key African cities.**

preneurship – our assumption is they already know how to create something – but how to leverage the power of branding to transform the myriad of commoditised products found in markets and street-corners in the continent. These gaps or opportunities are often spotted by non-African businesses who take them to market, leaving African businesses rattled.

#### **Are you going to be developing case studies on African brands and companies?**

Absolutely. That's one area that will be a key ABLA differentiator. We are actively developing and consolidating new and existing African case studies which we will eventually syndicate globally. While it is good to learn how the non-African brands are built, it is more important to understand and showcase African brands and understand how they leveraged their African heritage and responded to African conditions and environment to distinguish themselves.

Not many people know how unique African conditions inspired brands such

as Mpesa's mobile money transfer brand and MTN's pay-as-you-go solutions, which are now the world standards. Many of these brands reflect Africa's innovative and entrepreneurial ingenuity and possibilities inspired by a deep insight into the African consumer and culture.

We also want to focus on emerging brands that will be tomorrow's pan-African and global brands such as the global African culturally inspired brand Maxhosa and the emerging and possibly first global African jean brand, Tshepo Jeans. When Tshepo Mohlala started this brand and deliberately priced his jeans at a premium, he caused a furore, with consumers saying they were not going to pay 800 Rand (\$70) for a product made by a local boy. But when Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex, came to the country and purchased a pair of Tshepo jeans the brand exploded, and the same consumers were urgently searching for pairs of them – now willing to pay more than double the price.

This experience raises a fundamental issue with African consumers, their relationship with local brands and their constant seeking of external validation before supporting these brands. But the Tshepo Jeans story goes beyond validation by the Duchess of Sussex. Tshepo Mohlala had long before partnered with entrepreneur and actuary Jonty Brozin, whose family famously built Africa's most global fast food restaurant brand, Nando's, and together they have taken the brand to greater heights – leveraging the Brozins' global brand building and business management skills and Mohlala's design skills, customer knowledge and entrepreneurial energy.

#### **When you're growing a brand, is the approach different if you're in Kenya, Nigeria or South Africa?**

Of course. Africa is a diverse continent with multiple languages, cultures and infrastructures and economies. But the approach is filtered by the purpose and the vision of the brand. Is it a local brand or is it looking at being a regional brand, pan-African brand or global brand? At Brand Leadership, we've always advocated building brands by "thinking locally and acting globally". The foundation has to be the local insights which inspired the brand.

#### **How will you measure success?**

We will know ABLA has succeeded not in the number of learners but its influence on Africa-focused brand learning and the growth in admiration and demand for made in Africa brands. ■

*Applications for courses are now open. To find out more about the Academy and how to apply visit [www.abla.academy](http://www.abla.academy)*